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Abstract

Why, one could ask, does such a high proportion of the very best works of recently published literary and creative prose, which choose to engage with climate change, environmental shock, biodiversity crises, and extinction risks – the existential threats we face as a global multispecies population – all tell stories with and of nonhuman animals? My theory, one shared by Amitav Ghosh in The Great Derangement (although with differing conclusions) is that the very nature of the threats we face is a reckoning with our alienation from the nonhuman world. It is a reckoning we need to have, without 'hiding' away from our accountabilities. The argument here is that literature, poetry, and creative writings can help us have that reckoning by leading us to explore our storied relations with the nonhuman, especially animals. Ghosh, however, believes that the realist novel – and by implication the 'highest' forms of literature – has failed us in this need. This is because the novel has become a bourgeois vassal of numbing entertainments, and in such a form has wholly betrayed us, because it is not capable of coming to terms with the evidence of climate change: that, in simple terms, we are no longer connected to or a part of 'nature'. That is, the realist bourgeois novel cannot admit we are, and always have been, 'animals' dependent on our very real environment.

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My theory, one shared by Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement* (although with differing conclusions) is that the very nature of the threats we face is a reckoning with our alienation from the nonhuman world. It is a reckoning we need to have, without 'hiding' away from our accountabilities. The argument here is that literature, poetry, and creative writings can help us have that reckoning by leading us to explore our storied relations with the nonhuman, especially animals. Ghosh, however, believes that the realist novel – and by implication the 'highest' forms of literature – has failed us in this need. This is because the novel has become a bourgeois vassal of numbing entertainments, and in such a form has wholly betrayed us, because it is not capable of coming to terms with the evidence of climate change: that, in simple terms, we are no longer connected to or a part of 'nature'. That is, the realist bourgeois novel cannot admit we are, and always have been, 'animals' dependent on our very real environment.

In his analysis, Ghosh admittedly ignores the incredibly rich seams of science fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy and genre fiction, despite namechecking some of the most globally recognised writers in these fields, such as Margaret Atwood and David Mitchell (in Anglophone

cultures, at least). To take these, and many more, writers into account, would undermine his argument; which, at least in his point that our wilful desire to separate from and sit hierarchically above the nonhuman world underpins our failure to act appropriately toward the threats we face, is valid and credible. But the argument that the novel has not addressed these threats, such as climate change, falls apart when the much broader basilica of written works around our myriad crises is taken into account. And these works have multiplied exponentially as the dire warnings of what is happening to our planet, and the species who live on it, echo more loudly each day.

Where does this leave Joshua Lobb's new work, *The Flight of Birds*? Published by Sydney University Press in its Animal Publics series, it is 'a novel in twelve stories' and announces itself in its afterword, 'Field Notes' as a work of ficto-criticism, which for Lobb is to think of writing 'not just as an object of study but as a critical act in itself' (225). The work engages with the hypothesis put forward by a number of animal studies scholars, such as Fiona Probyn-Rapsey and Susan McHugh, that 'the kinds of stories we tell might counter the violent ways we interact with animals' (224). This sentiment is easy to identify in other works recently published that turn toward climate change, extinction, and existential threat through a deeper engagement with nonhuman life. These include Nicholas Royle's *An English Guide to Birdwatching*, that riffs beautifully and deeply on the nature of how we understand language (such as the word 'hide') through how we understand animals, especially birds; or Abi Curtis's post-apocalyptic retelling of the ark narrative, *Water and Glass*, part of which is told from the viewpoint of a Woolly Rat. By choosing to refocus agency on and through the perspectives of nonhuman others, each of these writers, and Lobb explicitly with his ficto-critical afterword, are addressing important facets of the public lives of animals in this age of climate change and extinction, and important considerations of what creative work can do to reveal, illustrate and illuminate those lives.

As Lobb says, his aim is to 'take these arguments [in animal studies] and explore what happens when they are transposed into fiction' (234). Lobb's explorations run parallel to the ethos proposed by André Krebber and Mieke Roscher in their introduction to *Animal Biography:*

Reframing Animal Lives to the responsibilities we have in thinking and writing about animals. For Krebber and Roscher, there is a great deal of value (and integrity) found not in trying to 'bring to light the self-experience of an animal other' (by for example ventriloquizing that nonhuman animal's voice through human language) but rather in efforts to 'reveal agency through external markers and through the intertwinement with others' (7). Not that such work lacks integrity. But Lobb's stories are more cautious, in many ways, while still beautifully written, than those works such as Gene Stone's *The Awareness,* that bring human forms of consciousness and language to the nonhuman actors. Indeed, Lobb is playful here in putting this question in relief: in his story 'Nocturne' Lobb acknowledges the risk of 'speaking for' animals as '"discursively dangerous": an act that strengthens the speaker at the expense of the spoken-for' (260). But, asks Lobb, in a 'speculative exercise' of trying not to 'speak for' birds, what would it be to 'avoid representing them altogether?' (260-261). This is an intelligent and curious way to approach a perennially thorny subject.

So, while believing there 'is something valuable in keeping a respectful distance from others, both literally and literarily' (263) the story, and the novel, inverts the often easily proposed argument that we cannot be in commensality with nonhuman others in our work, and that we can never know what it is they might want. As Lobb says in/about the story 'Magpies' the exertion here is to provide not a singular defining story 'about' or 'for' animals but to offer up one of 'a multiplicity of visions' that might free nonhuman animals (here, magpies) 'from the harm caused by a singular authoritative version' (265). Such is the contribution of Lobb's book to creative and critical practice summarized as clearly as you would wish: as writers, our job is to consider what we can add to the complexity of ways in which we live alongside animals, always opening up new stories, never closing down into a dominant, singular perspective of any other being. Useful for how we relate to other humans, too, I'd suggest, and I think Lobb would agree, manifest in his decision to not name the human characters throughout the novel (except one, and that one in the story about magpies), but let them intermingle with the other actors across species lines, despite accepting the real violence that is done to nonhumans unequally by humans. As Anat Pick reminds us, vulnerability is not distributed equally. Lobb's story 'Further

to Fly' illustrates this beautifully while being a horrible story, brutal in its banal recognition of the imbalance of power that we hold in relation to nonhuman lives and deaths. However, as 'realistic' as many of the stories that appear here are, Lobb's narratives do not always follow Hoffmann's *Tomcat Murr* to a logical tragic end, but rather steer closer to the form told by Coetzee through David Lurie, in *Disgrace*, in a reckoning of nonhuman animals to be affective and agential 'as social, rather than cognitive actors' (Krebber and Roscher, 7) in the writing itself.

The Flight of Birds sits comfortably alongside the works of Royle, Curtis, Coetzee and many others writing with animals and with theory in mind, and in great complementarity; looking at these works as part of a larger body moving urgently from and around a similar set of questions, we can begin to see how clever they are as fictions, how aesthetically pleasing they are as criticisms (yes, that way around), and then, how provocative they are as ficto-criticisms (whether they answer to that name or not).

Is it okay that I would have liked a little more in the 'Field Notes' on how the relationship between the agency of the many birds and the figure of the boy/man who reappears through the stories, whose narrative arc is brought to its subtle but potent end in the final story, was envisioned in Lobb's craft? But then perhaps that would be doing too much of the reader's work for us; perhaps it is a fiction writer's prerogative to remain silent on aspects of the narrative that may or may not appear potentially autobiographical; or, perhaps, it is because this element of the work does not answer the ficto-critical question that Lobb set out to answer for himself: 'What might a bird's story look like?'

Lobb does tell us that the 'human in the stories wants to have meaningful and conscientious encounters with the birds in his life' (280) as does the author, and it is enough, I suggest, that we come to feel this through the stories. What emerges in this work are the complex ways in which we can have those encounters; where we are sometimes magnificent failures in our attempts to do the nonhuman justice, as in 'Aves Admittant'; or we learn to leave well alone, as in 'The Flight of Birds'. And anyway, the power of fiction as theory, of the theory being done through the story, is that the narrative speaks for itself, after all. (And after all, a

story is not an animal, is it?) And as interesting, challenging and useful as the 'Field Notes' are to a critic's delight, they are not the delight that is most delicious. That remains the attribute of the stories themselves. But thinking (perhaps) of Genette's concept of the paratextual, are the 'Field Notes' part of the novel? Where does this ficto-critical work end or begin? (I'm reminded of David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten*, 'a novel in nine parts' and yet with ten sections, and which was perhaps one of the first texts to address climate change through the non-corporeal, that is, nonhuman, voice.) The paratext is an important consideration in itself, one that draws our attention to the many lines we draw, echoing Hayley Singer's instruction that we see 'lines of species difference and commonality [...] as narrative pathways, not boundaries' (185).

Lobb's writing is at many points sparse and straightforward, and at others more pungent and poetic, but underpinning the various virtuoso treatments of the material is an inch-perfect gauge of the weight of how a story unfolds in its telling. Lobb has a deft ability to use pace to deploy the experiences, tropes, and talismans of the book to come together at just the right moments; and the work is all the more devastatingly affecting for it.

I am so very glad that Sydney University Press has published a work that challenges critical boundaries in ficto-critical form, and in its Animal Publics series, because challenging critical boundaries is exactly what creative practice helps us do, in productive and just ways. In the final story 'The Flight of Birds' that gives the book its title, the character's encounters with a flock of gulls 'are moments that offer a new way for the young man to perceive his world' (275). Importantly, this new perception is one 'which may allow for the birds to be accepted on their own terms' (275). This is what Lobb's work offers: a speculative dance, a space in which to breathe, and admit to the stories we hold in our minds about other beings, so we can rethink them in light of a greater multiplicity of encounters, and of the tales we tell. In the context of the tragedies we face, the biodiversity loss and animal extinctions, *The Flight of Birds* is a moving, demanding, and important work.

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